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Oil Drilling in Arctic Called Departure From Past Policy

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, Nov. 11 — If Congress approves drilling for oil and gas in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, it will be breaking with government practice of the last 35 years, which has limited when drilling may occur in refuges, the General Accounting Office has concluded.

Oil wells are not uncommon in wildlife refuges around the country, and proponents of drilling have argued that if energy is extracted from refuges elsewhere, it can be done in Alaska, too.

In a report requested by an opponent of such drilling, Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, the accounting office found that about 13 percent of the refuges, in 21 states, had some kind of oil and gas activity last year.

But the office, the investigative and auditing arm of Congress, also found that since the passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, in 1966, the only leases that the government has signed for oil and gas exploration were where drillers on adjacent private land were extracting fuel from under the refuges.

In most of the others, the petroleum development preceded the creation of the refuge, or private companies already owned the mineral rights in the refuge.

Opponents of drilling have generally argued that the Alaska refuge is a unique, fragile treasure that should not be threatened by an oil spill, or even by the infringement of industrial development. Mr. Markey raised an additional point, that drilling in the refuge would set a bad precedent.

Proponents of drilling, he said, "very disingenuously argue that many refuges allow for drilling."

"What they don't mention is that none of that permission has been granted since 1966," he said, "and that if the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge was made an exception, it would become a Trojan horse that could be used to permit drilling in the 297 other refuges that have been identified by the United States Geological Survey as having oil and gas potential."

In January, in *The Wall Street Journal*, Senator John B. Breaux of Louisiana argued that there had been oil and gas production from refuges there for nearly 60 years, with 1,605 wells. "If Louisiana can do it, why can't Alaska?" Mr. Breaux, a Democrat, wrote. The wells and pipelines, he said, are on "fragile wetlands" that are home to a variety of wildlife. He said there had been "few adverse consequences."